Ironies of abolition

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DAVID BRION DAVIS
Slavery and Human Progress
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History is better than ever. More broadly trained than their predecessors and more attracted to the social sciences, the historians who came of professional age in the 1950s, 60s and early 70s often learnt from or even collaborated with sociologists, political scientists, and especially economists. Many social scientists, increasingly dissatisfied at being confined to the relatively static and homogeneous present, saw the past as a fresh lode of rich and interesting data. The resultant commingling of history with neighbouring disciplines produced an unprecedented outpouring of monographs, conventionally grouped under the rubric of the "new social history", that have greatly deepened our knowledge of previously underexplored topics: the history of the demography and living conditions of the masses, of non-European countries, of diseases and popular rituals, of ethnic groups and gays, of women, and, perhaps especially, of black people. Ever more theoretically and methodologically sophisticated, these studies have developed a momentum of their own, which has not, so far, been reversed even by the post-baby-boom educational cutbacks of Reagan and Thatcher, or the calls for a return to narrowly political and self-consciously patriotic history by Sir Keith Joseph and such American neo-conservatives as Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Of all these topics, the greatest advances have been made in the study of slavery, which has been completely rewritten since 1950. As David Brion Davis's forty-two pages of footnotes make clear, for the past three decades scholars have increasingly intensified what amounts to an international research project on slavery and anti-slavery. Social scientific historians have rediscovered and quantified innumerable documents, which have revealed often surprising facts about the death and fertility rates of slaves, the age and sex composition of slave populations, and the national and international slave trades. We know much more than any previous generation about the slaves' working conditions, diets, diseases, heights and weights, about slave prices, occupations, religions and even sex lives. The nuances of pro-slavery and anti-slavery thought have been traced and retraced. Studies of anti-slavery movements throughout the world continue to proliferate. The cycle from hypothesis to revision, which in earlier days took a half-century, has been reduced to perhaps a half-decade. Analyses of abolitions, reconstructions and race relations in general have joined those of slavery as the chief concerns of comparative cross-national history. Non-historians may not have fully realized it yet, but slavery and its consequences are now the hottest of topics in history, and few come closer to a mastery of the literature of this burgeoning sub-field than Professor Davis.

Davis's two previous books on the subject, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975) won a huge number of literary prizes in America. His new book is not a sequel, but partly a re-exploration of certain themes in the first two volumes from a somewhat different perspective and in the light of more recent scholarship, and partly a preview of the forthcoming, concluding volume of his chronological trilogy, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation, 1815–1890*.

Unlike the more social scientific historians on whose conclusions he draws extensively, but whose methods and modes of argument he does not imitate, Davis has less a thesis and a set of tests for it than an organizing motif and an insatiable taste for irony. To the common understanding of the twentieth century, unconsciously shaped by abolitionist rhetoric, popular history and classical economics, slavery and progress were antithetical, and abolition was the inevitable by-product of modernization. Not only was slavery morally anachronistic, but since owners had to keep slaves ignorant and to minimize dissent within the free population, slave societies were by nature inimical to democracy and freedom of thought, inhospitable to technological and scientific advances, and antagonistic to industrialization and diversification, which are indispensable for modern economic growth.

Touching on events that extend over two millennia, from the expansion of the Roman Empire in the third century BC, to the final outlawing of slavery on the Arabian peninsula in 1970, Davis argues persuasively that the relationship between slavery and progress, in its moral, cultural and material senses, was much more complex and problematical than is usually assumed. Since it brought the "uncultured" into contact with the "superior" Roman, Muslim or Christian civilizations, slavery was almost everywhere initially justified as a progressive step. Yet when an anti-slavery movement began to develop, for the first time in world history, during the late eighteenth century, it branded slavery as inefficient, un-Christian and backward in an increasingly capitalist world in which individual freedom, subject only to the laws of supply and demand, was the best guarantee of prosperity.

In legislating for many post-emancipation societies, with the notable exception of the United States, "progressives" joined or compromised with planters in backing apprenticeship systems and other legal efforts to prevent the ex-slaves from leaving the plantations. These abridgements of laissez-faire, as well as the large-scale importation of contract labourers (which most abolitionists apparently opposed), were designed to ensure that the inability to work freedmen like slaves would not undermine the various countries' socio-economic systems and staple crop economies – that moral progress would not impede material progress. Thus constrained, emancipation, in the approving phrase of one British abolitionist, meant substituting "the dread of starvation . . . for the dread of being flogged". When, contrary to abolitionist predictions, output fell because freedmen withdrew some of their labour from the major crops, the belief in black inferiority, Davis asserts, was strengthened.

A final major ironic connection between progress and slavery is that the British crusade against the slave trade and slavery after West Indian emancipation in the 1830s often required intervention in the affairs of "backward" nations, regularly produced backlashes and evasions that resulted in the short run in even worse mistreatment and repression of slaves *en route* to or already present in those countries, and at times served as little more than a pretext for imperialist expansion. While the concept of a slave, which Davis defines as "a human being who is legally owned, used, sold, or otherwise disposed of as if he or she were a domestic animal", remained remarkably constant, that of "progress", which he refuses to define, twisted like a kaleidoscope, often providing a convenient colouring for self-interest.

Empire, slavery and commercial expansion typically went together, although Davis declines to assign causal priority among them. The growth of Roman power after the Punic Wars, the rapid Islamic conquests of the seventh century, and the world-wide extension of Iberian influence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were all concomitant with unprecedented increases in the number of slaves and changes in the character of slavery, the most important being the Spanish and Portuguese restriction of slavery to people of African descent. In none of these empires or anywhere else is there convincing evidence that slavery retarded technological, commercial or scientific advances, or that slave labour was incompatible with the simultaneous employment of at least nominally free labour.

While the institution was not associated with colour in the ancient or medieval Christian worlds, the Muslims developed racial stereotypes as bitter and derogatory as those common among antebellum Americans or contemporary South Africans. According to a tenth-century Arabic account, for instance, blacks were "malodorous, stinking, woolly-haired, with uneven limbs, deficient minds, and depraved passions", and a fourteenth-century Arab historian contended that black Africans were "the only people who accept slavery" because of "their low degree of humanity and their proximity to the animal stage". Although Muslims enslaved Christians and Jews as well, they may have imported as many black Africans into territories that they controlled as Christians later sent to the Americas, and they apparently treated Africans much worse than they did Europeans.

"European traders making contact with the inhabitants of Cayor at Cape Verde", reproduced from Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century, *edited by D. T. Niane, volume four in the Unesco General History of Africa (751pp. Heinemann Educational Books. 16.50. 0 435 94810 5).*

Slavery had existed time out of mind in the cosmopolitan international crossroads areas of southern Italy, Sicily and neighbouring islands. But when the fall of Constantinople in 1453 cut off the supply of Slavs, Mediterranean Christian traders turned to sub-Saharan Africa as a source of manpower for their vineyards and sugar plantations. The late fifteenth-century Portuguese development of Madeira and other Atlantic islands as thriving plantation areas cultivated by black slaves was therefore more a continuation of than a break with previous European practices.

Since perhaps as many as 80–95 per cent of the Amerindians succumbed to Old World diseases during the first century after the conquest, since whites did not migrate to the New World in sufficient numbers to fill the demand for labourers, and since black slaves could be obtained relatively cheaply in the efficient if deadly slave trade, four times as many Africans as Europeans immigrated – the former involuntarily – to the Americas before 1820. Although Eric Williams's hypothesis that capital which derived from the profits of West Indian slavery fuelled Britain's Industrial Revolution has now been discredited, those islands were Britain's major non-European trading partners from 1713 to 1822, and slaves were an important segment of the population not only in plantation areas throughout the Americas, but in the more "modern" colonial ports as well. Thus, it was those states that were most advanced in navigation and commerce, such as the Genoese, the Portuguese and, later, the English, that took the lead in extending slavery, and slaves were crucial to the settlement of the New World, which is usually considered a progressive development.

Before the late eighteenth century no religion was incompatible with slavery. Not even the Jews, who were often persecuted or denied full citizenship in the Mediterranean area as well as in Europe, developed any incipient anti-slavery ideas; they participated in the slave trade and even operated plantations when not prohibited from doing so. Nor was the Enlightenment, in either its philosophical or classical economic guises, more than equivocally anti-slavery. Locke wrote a pro-slavery constitution for South Carolina, Hume thought blacks naturally inferior to whites, and Thomas Jefferson and many French *philosophes* believed or hoped that slavery would somehow automatically die out without the necessity for active human intervention. Adam Smith condemned slavery, but the implications of his laissez-faire ideology were ambiguous. An anonymous conservative follower of Smith, whom Davis quotes at length, used it to damn government action against slavery as futile and perhaps even potentially harmful to black welfare, while the Liverpool East India merchant James Cropper, a Quaker whose influence in the British anti-slavery movement Davis emphasizes more than most previous accounts have, employed it to indict bondage as an unnatural restraint on individual freedom.

Instead of secular free-thinkers, it was Protestant evangelicals – Quakers, New England Congregationalists and English dissenters – who fostered the anti-slavery movement. They did so partly, Davis suggests, as a counter-attack against Enlightenment infidelity, Establishment discrimination against Nonconformists, and what they considered the compromising worldliness of the churches and the larger corruptions of the industrializing Anglo-American cultures. Progressive in representing a radical attack on one of the chief institutions of society, the religious anti-slavery movement was at the same time conservative, aiming to restore a Christianity purified through the struggle against the iniquity of slavery.

The opponents of involuntary servitude were torn between two concepts of progress – gradual reform, which, however slow to stem evil, promised political viability and the least disruption to the community, and the apocalyptic stroke of immediate abolition, more difficult to achieve and dangerous to order, but fatal to sin. Each process, Davis contends, also had more conservative variants or at least possible unprogressive implications. Gradualism might undermine total abolition, as it arguably did in the wake of the passage of emancipation acts by the northern states of the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, the 1807 curtailment of the African slave trade by both Britain and America, and the enactment of the Rio Branco law in Brazil in 1871, by encouraging the anti-slavery forces to pause to assess their achievements and to allow incentives created by those laws to take effect. It might also invite planters to undercut their opponents' crusades by adopting piecemeal and largely cosmetic reforms.

A commitment to comprehensive change in a single stroke, on the other hand, might delay ameliorative measures, and by concentrating attention solely on the legal relationship of slave to master might condemn the freedmen to quasi-slavery after emancipation, as abolitionists rested on their laurels and neglected the larger questions of equal rights. For those at least as much concerned with the productivity of plantation societies as with the freedom and equality of blacks, abolition might have to be so hedged around with restraints as to reduce the difference between the slave and the freedman to a matter of mere words. In the event, British anti-slavery men and women kept up the attack on planter abuses long after 1834 and launched an unremitting and expensive, if largely unsuccessful campaign against the international slave trade, while the Amer-

ican abolitionist movement, broadened after mid-century to include many Republican politicians, fostered what appears in comparative perspective to have been the world's most radical experiment in immediate post-emancipation egalitarian reform. None the less, without the focus on the relatively clearcut issue of slavery, public support for the cause in both countries cooled.

The British movement was a deceptive example for the world in general and for America in particular. The constitutional power of the white West Indians to control their region's social institutions was much less secure than that of the southern United States. British abolitionists enjoyed superior access to the government, the two James Stephens, father and son, actually helping to draft the 1807 and 1834 anti-slavery acts. Though it appeared from afar and in retrospect as a continuous movement, gradually and inevitably triumphing, British anti-slavery was in fact always sharply divided over tactics, and its power ebbed several times over its history. It finally lurched into limited emancipation in the wake of a spontaneous public upsurge of anti-slavery feeling and of the 1832 electoral reform, which greatly reduced the number of pro-slavery representatives in Parliament. Whereas the Anglican or non-religious West Indian planters repeatedly denied Christian instruction to their slaves and persecuted white dissenting missionaries, southern slave-owners were often revivalized evangelicals who sought to employ religion to divert bondsmen's concerns to the hereafter. Lacking such a sectarian rallying-cry and usually facing much more unified opposition than the class-splintered West Indians provided, abolitionists in the United States and elsewhere could make little headway by mimicking British tactics. Abolition in the French colonies, the United States, Cuba and Brazil came about more as a result of temporary liberal triumphs in the metropolises, war and the actions of the slaves themselves in deserting plantations and enrolling as soldiers than as a consequence of calculated long-term campaigns by anti-slavery movements.

Not only were the British free with misleading advice. At the climax of the American struggle during the Civil War, England, leader of the new industrial order, ostentatious champion of world anti-slavery, suffocatingly righteous critic of the practices of what John Stuart Mill termed "the barbarous nations", sympathized much more with the slave-holding Confederacy than with the growingly anti-slavery Union. Why were not only Tory, but Liberal newspapers more critical of Lincoln's than of Jefferson Davis's government? Why did so many of the British, forgetting how compromised the West Indian abolition act had been, respond so sneeringly to the morally understated Emancipation Proclamation? Why did claims that emancipation would disrupt the society and economy of the South worry British abolitionists, who had earlier dismissed similar West Indian contentions as self-serving falsehoods? Straining in his perpetual quest for irony, Davis finds the central answer in British fears that America represented the vulgar, democratic future of insatiable materialism, raw class conflict and unregulated social change. The most self-consciously progressive nation on earth, in other words, dreaded the future.

This insight, typical of many in Davis's provocative but deeply unsatisfying book, raises as well as any other observation that he makes the question of how far historical knowledge is advanced by his allusive, oblique and professedly non-social-scientific approach. How important was this alleged English phobia in stimulating anti-Yankee feeling as against, for instance, the desire to restore imports of cotton for the textile-mills or the impulse to weaken a growing industrial and commercial rival? Doesn't Davis have the responsibility to spell out his reasoning openly, so that the reader can judge?

To put the point more generally, it seems to me that the central task of the social history of ideas is to determine how important particular beliefs were, compared to other beliefs, interests or constraints, in motivating people's actions. The pursuit of that goal demands clear descriptions of ideas and their connections and contradictions; statements, as precise as the data allow, about the frequency and strength with which relevant individuals or groups held those values; and the explicit marshalling of evidence for and against competing explanations of their behaviour.

Applied to Davis's work, this scheme would entail, first, a more straightforward discussion of the ideas of progress and slavery, and of changes in them and in their relationship to each other at different times and in different societies. Second, it implies the necessity of making systematic efforts to determine the incidence of certain views which Davis asserts that particular groups held. How common were gradualist or immediatist anti-slavery feelings, as well as pro-slavery opinions among *philosophes* and evangelicals? Were abolitionist evangelicals more or less sympathetic than other Low Churchmen to the Enlightenment, Establishment latitudinarianism, or "modern" society in general? To what extent did Anglo-American abolitionists endorse the principles of laissez-faire? How many offered criticisms, and how many defences of the living conditions of non-slaves in America and the British Isles, and what connections, if any, did they make between slavery and the exploitation of free workers? What trends were there in the belief in black inferiority among whites in Europe and America in the nineteenth century? Were pro or anti-imperialist sentiments more common among anti-slavery activists, and how did their opinions on empire compare with those who took no part in or opposed the abolitionist movement?

Third, the programme would involve attempts to specify the extent to which relevant beliefs were compartmentalized and of the degree to which verbal commitments to the clichés "progress" and the "advance of civilization" were merely rhetorical covers for actions taken for other, often self-interested reasons. How compatible were the tenets of free-market individualism with equal rights and the welfare of the freedmen, and when they seemed to clash, why did certain individuals choose one rather than the other? Was religious conversion really a reason or just an excuse for enslavement by Muslims, Jews or Christians? Were those who professed an anti-slavery motive for establishing or tightening imperial control over a colony sincere?

Davis knows far better than I, perhaps better than anyone else, just what evidence exists on such questions. As perceptive as he is learned and diligent, he offers illuminating comments on a whole range of topics besides those mentioned in the first part of this review – from the non-violent Garrisonians' acceptance of violence by surrogates, to the reasons for the Paulistas' changing attitudes toward slavery in Brazil in the 1880s, to echoes of the pro-slavery argument in the nominally anti-slavery reports of the Legue of Nations in the 1920s. It is rather Davis's a priori assumptions about human nature, epistemology and the way in which historical arguments should be constructed that are the source of what I consider the book's failings. To one who begins, as Davis does, with the supposition that "human moods and outlooks are seldom consistent", the goal of analysing belief systems rigorously may seem irrelevant, if not misleading. To one who claims to believe in "the multiple character of truth" (are all truths equally valid? are some more equal than others?), explicit tests designed to allow a choice between clearly formulated competing interpretations may appear pointless. To one for whom history is "a kind of moral philosophy teaching by examples" which should proceed by seeking to recapture "the varied angles of vision that are also the subject of imaginative literature", the Popperian falsificationism that is the basis of so much social science may seem a naive oversimplification.

Although Davis is not always faithful to his "humanistic" creed of inconsistency and complexity, those premises do shape his overall strategy of presentation, and they vitiate much of the impact of his research and reflection. If history, like other systematic bodies of knowledge – "science", if you will – is to progress, it must do so not just by increasing the number of scattered, if brilliant insights, but by formulating and provisionally accepting some empirical propositions, and by rejecting others. David Brion Davis's will persuade nearly everyone to pause, henceforth, before equating progress with abolition. It will not, however, push the study of the history of slavery very far forward.

Building the artisan republic

Mari Jo Buhle

SEAN WILENTZ
Chants Democratic: New York City and the rise of the American working class, 1788–1850
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0 19 503342 6

Sean Wilentz aptly describes his *Chants Democratic* as "an extended historical essay on capitalism and democracy in the United States". A lengthy, detailed study of "class formation" during the half-century following the American Revolution, the book is less a narrative than an interpretation of the re-ordering of social relations during the transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism. The theme, which is a familiar one to social and labour historians, concerns the fate of the artisan's workshop as markets expanded and crafts underwent the ineluctable process of industrialization. The changing relations of production, the erosion of apprenticeship and subsequent weakening of bonds between masters and journeymen, and the meaning of the wage system itself provide the structure of this classic story.

Professor Wilentz's variation on the theme, a close examination of change in metropolitan New York, is far from simple, focusing on the varying rates at which the process took place among the city's major crafts. He refuses to limit industrialization to the creation of factories and emphasizes the slow rate of mechanization, the persistence of the small shop, and the actual expansion of outwork in New York during this period. His unexcelled treatment of the sweated trades, especially consumer finishing and garment manufacturing, brings out with subtlety and precision the complexity of early industrial development.

Chants Democratic is a study not merely of class relations, structurally defined, but of ideology. Wilentz is concerned with new forms of social consciousness, and his re-examination of material conditions serves principally as the backdrop to an extended analysis of "artisan republicanism". Drawing on the important contributions of J. G. A. Pocock, he gives a detailed account of how the artisans adapted formal republican thought, and elaborated a distinct variant "bound to their expectations about workshop production". Taking to heart basic republican ideals, such as commonwealth, virtue, independence, citizenship and equality, American artisans articulated a vision of a co-operative workshop in which mutual obligation and respect prevailed. As the emerging system of wage labour denied this possibility, masters and journeymen began to diverge in their interpretations. Wilentz demonstrates how, by 1850 the prevalence of inequality and political corruption in New York City moved working men to reconsider the meaning of the artisan republic. Slowly and unevenly they transformed the older system of belief into a penetrating critique of the class relations of industrial capitalism.

In following the twists and turns of this intellectual odyssey, Wilentz sheds new light on familiar events. He reinterprets a major episode in New York political history, the Working Men's movement of 1829–30. He casts Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen and Thomas Skidmore into roles of radical republican ideologues of varying shades, and salvages the defeated movement from its reputed futility. He places their campaign – "the first case study of lower-class insurgency that emerged through the cracks in the party system" – at the centre of a major public debate on the links between party politics and capitalist entrepreneurs. With similar insight, he examines the General Trades' Union of the City of New York, representative in 1836 of perhaps as much as two-thirds of the city's working men. These newly organized workers addressed the new forms of exploitation in the capitalist workshop and protested the "line of *distinction* between the employer and the employed" as the source of an economic dependence that weakened virtue, corrupted the citizen, and threatened the Republic itself. They articulated, according to Wilentz, "the elements of a working-class . . . political economy".

Wilentz does not restrict his analysis to the familiar institutions of political and trade-union history. Some of his best chapters delineate a popular culture of radicalism. Outside the workshop and in the boisterous neighbourhoods of the Bowery, mass entertainments, social clubs, volunteer fire companies and even gangs of prowling youths defined "a republicanism of the street". Wilentz explores these popular forms, including their more distasteful elements such as anti-abolitionism and nativism, as well as the alternatives introduced by outsiders. Evangelical religious revivalism and temperance campaigns drew converts from working-class districts, especially during the hard depression years. Wilentz shows how moral reformers utilized such things as theatre, picnics and even fishing trips of their own ends, and explains their appeal to the city's dispossessed. His treatment of the Washingtonian temperance movement of the 1840s highlights its ambiguities in class terms.

It is tempting to compare *Chants Democratic* to E. P. Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). The similarities are readily apparent. Wilentz unabashedly places class relations at the centre of American history and builds upon Thompson's essential insight that this history is as much political and cultural as economic. He resembles Thompson in his capacity to shape an analysis of epic proportion, in his choice of the perfect anecdote to reduce the scale to a human one, and in achieving stylistic grace as well as clarity of interpretation. *Chants Democratic* is the latest testimony to Thompson's persistent influence on American social historians.

Despite its breadth, though, this work is not the long-awaited American counterpart of Thompson's masterpiece, and Wilentz is rightly circumspect in stating its claims. He tempers his ambition to explain the emergence of a working-class presence by mid-century by emphasizing the limits of his specialized research. He does not argue that New York City represented a typical case of class formation applicable to other regions. Rather, his rendering of events in the Great Metropolis supplies "an important part of this historical puzzle" and merely suggests the contours of a possible pattern. Wilentz hints, moreover, that his story concludes at the brink of an even more eventful era, one covering the last half of the nineteenth century when a major struggle ensued "over what the working-class presence meant and over what its project should be". *Chants Democratic* stands, then, as one very important chapter in a much larger history still to be written.

On its own terms, *Chants Democratic* falls short of its mark by failing to place all workers within the republican tradition. By the mid-1840s New York City had begun to take on a distinctly foreign character, as immigrants from Ireland and Germany reshaped its working-class neighbourhoods and predominated in several trades. Although Wilentz details their crucial role in labour organizations of the 1850s and discusses the divisive aspects of nativism, he deals only indirectly with the ethnic contribution to class ideology. Similarly, although he pays close attention to the presence of women in manufacturing, especially in the clothing trade, Professor Wilentz does not examine the well-known "gender" aspects of republican ideology. Despite its deficiencies in these respects, *Chant Democratic* offers the fullest exploration to date of class and ideology in nineteenth-century America.